Molly Cain

Beth Horihan

Nicole Feldhaus

**Collage and Ethical Analysis**

        Male leaders, such as kings and warriors, have played a significant role throughout history, as discussed in this course.  These individuals and their actions are not only influenced by society, but also their own values, which raises a controversial ethical issue: Is it ethical for a male leader to live and act by different ethical standards than he expects his subjects and the rest of society to abide by?  This can be explored through various traits of kings and mighty warriors across Medieval Europe such as Childeric, Clovis, Charlemagne, Siegfried, Constantine, Attila, and Beowulf.

        Childeric was, in essence, the first king of the Franks, circa 440-481. He was widely known for his lust-filled love life.  Through Salic Law, various decrees were created to establish the value of women’s virtues, as seen in Law XV, “He who secretly has intercourse with a free girl with the consent of both and it is proved against him shall be liable to pay eighteen hundred denarii (Drew 80).”  However, during this time, women didn’t have a major say in decisions that affected their lives, so the men within their family usually verbalized consent for them.  Yet Childeric placed himself above these laws, as noted in Geary, that “Childeric, King of the Franks, whose private life was one long debauch, began to seduce the daughters of his subjects (Gregory of Tours 139).”  As a result of this, his people held him accountable and pushed him out of power.  Despite these violations of community ethics, his personal relationships were able to help restore him to power.  This shows that even if, as a king, you do something wrong, as long as you have people who support you, whether out of fear or out of loyalty, then one is able to maintain power.  This is seen as Childeric had “left behind a close friend of his who was able to soothe the minds of his angry subjects with his honeyed words…Childeric’s faithful friend succeeded in pacifying them….(Gregory of Tours 139).”  This allowed him to return to power and stability within his society, a strength for the region, as it is better for a people if the region is under the rule of one king, rather than experiencing the constant over turning of power.

        However, there would come a time when Childeric would turn his power over to his son, Clovis, who would rule the Franks from about 481-511.  While he was in power, his wife Clotild significantly influenced his life, particularly with insisting on the baptism of their sons and his eventual conversion to Christianity.  She strived for a great deal of time to persuade him to believe in Christ, but Childeric continually refused to accept this belief until “finally a war broke out against the Alamanni and in this conflict he was forced by necessity to accept what he had refused of his own free will (Gregory of Tours 146).”  It wasn’t until his men were quickly being annihilated that he raised his eyes to heaven and called on God to help win the battle, which would end in his favor, and this event led to his conversion.  However, this would not be the final battle that Clovis and his men would partake in, though he would continue to expand and hold power through less than honest ways, such as through trickery and bribery.  This was evident even within his own family, with rivalry and competition among Clovis and his brothers.  “They [his brothers] were enemies, and when Godigisel heard of the victories won by King Clovis he sent envoys to him in secret. ‘If you help me to attack my brother,’ he said, ‘so that I can kill him in battle or drive him out of his territory, I will pay you any annual tribute which you may care to exact.’ Clovis gladly accepted the offer and in his turn promised to help Godigisel wherever occasion should arise (Gregory of Tours 147).”  Kings were not to kill other kings, but this is exactly what Clovis does, in a manner of trickery by having others actually follow through with this underhanded, sneaky act.  This is noted in Geary, as Clovis states that he “take[s] no responsibility for what has happened. It is not for me to shed the blood of one of my fellow kings, for that is a crime; but since things have turned out in this way, I will give you my advice and you must make of it what you will. It is that you should turn to me and put yourself under my protection (Gregory of Tours 152).”  It was through this deceitfulness that he waged numerous wars and scored countless victories, allowing Clovis to be greatly known for the vast expansion of his territories.  However, the fact that this wasn’t against his own people allows him to maintain the support of his subjects and in turn stay in power.

        Centuries after the reign of Clovis, Charlemagne became a powerful authority and king of the Franks, and was a notable leader for several reasons.  His personal values and beliefs set him apart from most rulers in the time period spanning the years 768-841.  These values and beliefs were not only expressed in Charlemagne’s expectations for himself, but also in his expectations of the members of his society.  The most clearly demonstrated of these values was moderation, which encompassed every aspect of the society, stretching from drinking and eating to the acquisition of power.  This moderation may have come as a result of his desire to be closely linked to the Church.  He was a great supporter of the Church both through his lifestyle and in material support.  Charlemagne provided monetary means to help with the construction of basilicas and attempted to establish close ties with Rome.  This support of the church aligned closely with the Salian laws that protected basilicas from being burned: “He who voluntarily or through negligence sets fire to a basilica shall be liable to pay eight thousand denarii (Drew 126).”  With his close ties to the church financially, it seems logical that Charlemagne would also seek to tie his political position to the Church and Rome.  One way this was accomplished was in the expectation for leaders to refrain from heightening their position, just as how officeholders in the church were supposed to resist, for to seek power was seen as the mark of a tyrant (Collins 292).  He approached his position as king as a duty or responsibility instead of as a privilege as many of his predecessors had.  It could be seen that Charlemagne viewed himself as one of the people, having shared their values and wished for his subjects to share his as well, as was made evident in his attempts to provide access to education through cathedral schools.

Moving away from the Frankish territories, we transition back to 5th century but in Burgundy, where Siegfried stands as a mighty warrior.  He was known for his outstanding strength, courage, bravery, and fearlessness in battle. “…Siegfried was a most welcome guest among the Burgundians, and, believe me, he was honored by them for his manly courage a thousand times more than I can tell you, so that none could see him and harbor any grudge against him.....Siegfried was always the best, whatever they did: he was so strong that none was a match for him...(Hatto 31).”  Not only during his life was he honored by many, but even after his death this continued, as his wife Kriemheld, his father Siegmund, and the peoples’ lamentations were extensive.  “Lord Siegmund clasped the noble prince to him and the laments of his friends mounted to such a pitch that the palace and the hall and indeed the whole city of Worms echoed mightily their weeping. Siegfried’s wife would not be consoled (Hatto 135).”  While he maintained these strong characteristics and loyalty from his subjects, he also had a significant flaw in his character. After Gunther tells Siegfried of his humiliating experience during his first night shared with Brunhild, Siegfried offers his assistance in the matter that coming night.  In this situation, Siegfried’s deceitfulness takes over and he ends up raping Brunhild.  This flaw in his character is emphasized by the Burgundian Laws, as adultery and the rape of women was a punishable crime.  Therefore, he faces this proposed ethical issue of placing himself above the standards and laws that are set for the rest of society, even though many saw him as an honorable warrior and Gunther rewards him.

We now shift to the Roman Empire during 741-775, where Constantine began to leave his mark. His reign was characterized by major reforms to the empire, but began with a very rocky start with some members of his society.  The beginning of his rule was characterized by the persecution of Christians.  This persecution, through killings, laws against their practices, and destruction of religious art, gained Constantine a ruthless reputation.  It was said that “Constantine V was a totally destructive bloodsucking wild beast...(Collins 228).”  He elevated himself to the status of a god in his kingship, which was in line with the pagan beliefs of the majority of his empire.  He made laws that called for the destruction of many religious icons in the Christian Church and forced many monks into marriages.  All of these were attempts to diminish the visible presence of Christianity, which his own mother practiced.  The Christians persisted through all of the persecutions and remained a committed and tight knit section of Roman society.  As this was occurring, Constantine began to come to accept their religion. His persecution of Christians diminished and eventually disappeared, creating greater harmony in his empire.  He eventually played a role in the Edict of Milan and the Council of Nicaea.  However, despite the fact that Christians were not oppressed toward the end of his reign, there were still minority groups that were marginalized and persecuted within the society.  This is supported by the limitations placed upon the Jews in the Empire that prevented them from gaining higher status than the now favored Christians: “No Jew whatever shall purchase a Christian slave or contaminate an ex-Christian with Jewish religious rites (“Theodosian Code” 3).”  Therefore, while it can be seen that Constantine’s rule became more inclusive to the members of his society, he continued to enforce status of his subjects based upon his personal values and beliefs at the time.

From here, we swing our focus toward a group located near the Danube River in the mid fifth century, a people who were known by other groups as the Huns.  Attila became the single leader of the Huns as a result of their “success in establishing control over other peoples, rather than being the cause of it,” (Collins 49) which is slightly different from how other leaders at this time were gaining authority and power.  Due to the nomadic society the Huns lived in, Collins notes that some “dramatic change [may have] force[d] them to alter their time-honored procedures,” (Collins 49) thus allowing them to come into contact with different groups of people, which Collins terms “The Coming of the Huns”.  The surprise factor of their arrival may have greatly affected their ability to overthrow powerful kings and groups at the time, as was displayed in the ruthlessness of the group’s attacks.  Attila and “the Huns caused the collapse of the hitherto stable Gothic kingdom of the Greuthungi” (Collins 48) when they invaded this area.  As Attila rose to become the leader of the Huns, he was able to obtain authority from his own people and then exercise and maintain the power over others from the support and loyalty of his own group.

A final influential male leader in the fifth century was Beowulf, whose virtue and prowess were known throughout the land of the Danes.  Beowulf took it upon himself to travel to the land of Hrothgar to offer his skills as a warrior to defeat the monster, Grendel.  The devastation incurred by this monster led to their need of an outsider, a man whose strength, bravery, and loyalty would exceed Grendel’s own.  The boast was a part of this ancient culture; however, Beowulf chastises Unferth for downgrading his contest against Breca by claiming that he does not “boast when [he] say[s]/that neither you nor Breca were ever much/celebrated for swordsmanship/or for facing danger on the field of battle” (*Beowulf* 583-586).  Beowulf continues to tell Unferth the facts he knows about Unferth’s unrespectable actions in battle, such as when he “killed [his] own kith and kin (*Beowulf* 587).”  Essentially, Beowulf appears to be saying that boasting of one’s own feats or degrading the worth of someone else’s is wrong; yet, he continues to tell stories of his own victories and conquests with no qualms.  Beowulf is often spoken of as a humble man, but is never afraid to bolster himself up: “The truth is this:/ when the going was heavy in those high waves,/ I was the strongest swimmer of all (*Beowulf* 532-534).”  This scene of boasting and degrading illustrates the importance of reputation and how one is viewed by others in this time.  The role of King Hrothgar in this epic is also significant to Beowulf’s part as a leader and warrior, as Hrothgar’s gift-giving, hospitality, and need give him the incentive to continue to fight for this man.  Beowulf is viewed by others as a heroic, courageous, and fair fighter and thought of very highly as “one so valiant and venturesome” and “strong in body and mature in mind, impressive in speech (*Beowulf* 299-300, 1840).”  Overall, Beowulf’s loyalty and protection of Hrothgar and his people surpass his boastful nature, as the battles he fought and the relationships he built are more significant.  Beowulf “[drew] two peoples,/ the Geat nation and us neighbouring Danes,/ into shared peace and a pact of friendship/ in spite of hatreds we have harboured in the past” (*Beowulf* 1855-1858), and behaved and performed as a true leader and warrior should at that time.

These kings and warriors have played a significant role in historical society as leaders, particularly in challenging the standards and laws expected of society members.  This allows us to explore the ethical issue of whether or not it should be considered morally correct for the male leaders of a society to be able to live and act by different ethical standards than what is expected of everyone else.  While you are left to form your own opinion on this issue, we have presented you with both the honorable traits and the dishonest, challenging struggles that composed some of the great Medieval European leaders’ lives.  Would these men still have been successful rulers if they did not place themselves above the expectations of members of society?

**Works Cited**

Collins, Roger. *Early Medieval Europe, 300-1000*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.

Drew, Katherine Fischer. *The Burgundian Code*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

n.d.

Drew, Katherine Fischer. *The Laws of the Salian Franks*. Philadelphia: University of

Pennsylvania, 1991. 57-167.

Gregory of Tours. "History of the Franks." *Readings in Medieval History.* By Patrick J. Geary.

3rd ed. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 1998. 139-61.

Hatto, A. T. *The Nibelungenlied*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1965.

Heaney, Seamus. Beowulf. New York: Norton & Company, Inc., 2000.

"Theodosian Code." *Readings in Medieval History.* By Patrick J. Geary. 3rd ed. Peterborough,

Ont.: Broadview, 1998. 1-28.